Historiography in psychology: A note on ignorance

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Abstract
A persistent theme in books and essays concerning the history of psychology suggests something amiss in tracing that history to ancient sources. Authoritative writers on the subject reject any intimation of continuity from classical to modern perspectives. Nonetheless, writers of textbooks identify the ancient world of philosophy and science as wellsprings of issues still alive within the discipline. To some, this tendency is attributed to simple ignorance. The controversy here is based on a failure to appreciate the relationship and the differences between continuity and recurrence, as well as an undisciplined application of terms far too protean for the intended purpose.

Keywords
classical works, history of psychology, philosophy

In his interesting and influential Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found its Language (1997), Kurt Danziger made the following observation:

Because Aristotle was responsible for a book about “the soul,” he was long credited with being the first to write systematically about psychology. Textbooks on the history of psychology commonly begin with the Greeks, ignoring the fact that the very notion of “psychology” in the modern sense, forming a distinct field of study, can hardly be said to have existed before the eighteenth century. (p. 21)

Before assessing this claim, a few words are in order regarding the allegedly widespread notion of indebtedness. It is surely the case that textbooks, not only in the history of psychology, but in those covering a wide range of academic and scientific subjects, often reserve a special place for the achievements of the Hellenic and Hellenistic ages. It is

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probably also the case that too often homage is expressed in the form of dependency such
that later developments seem impossible in the absence of some ancient Greek genius.
Such abuses of historical research were clearly identified by Giambattista Vico. In his
New Science he cites the fallacy of scholastica successionis civitatum, which would
attribute the achievements of a later age to the direct influence of specific forerunners
(Vico, 1744, pp. 56–57). I discuss Vico’s cautions early in my own text in the history of
psychology (Robinson, 1995, pp. 6ff.). However, Danziger’s scolding must be reaching
for something more subtle than transparently bizarre assertions that major figures in
modern psychology are directly indebted to a small cadre of long-dead Greeks.

To locate the otherwise elusive target of Danziger’s criticism, I return to the above-
quoted passage, noting here that each of his two sentences might well be the focus of a
chapter-length disquisition. Looked at superficially, the phrase “‘psychology’ in the
modern sense” reduces the entire thought to a mere truism, for if there is, indeed, some
settled idea of what psychology is in the 21st century, it would be nonsensical to con-
tend that ancient Greek thinkers had anticipated just this sense of things 2,500 years
ago. It would be akin to asking why, in light of the fact that Democritus had a theory of
atoms, he somehow failed to see that he would need an accelerator to test it! The whole
point of placing something within temporal brackets—as in [modern psychology]—is
to distinguish it from earlier or later variants. One does not speak of “modern rain” or
“modern mountains,” for their essential properties are not subject to change. To say that
modern chemistry has certain debts to Renaissance alchemy is, among other things, to
point to significant differences. Beyond these considerations, there is the phrase itself:
“Psychology in the modern sense” suggests something definite though undefined. Just
what is “psychology” in the modern sense? Moreover, just who in the 18th century
might be said to have shared and promulgated that “modern” sense? I return to these
questions later.

In the same passage, Danziger’s first sentence refers somewhat airily to the fact that
Aristotle wrote “a book.” We have but a very small fraction of what Aristotle wrote.
What is clear, however, is that subjects central to the mission of any science of human
nature plausibly regarded as psychology are treated in detail across a number of his trea-
tises, with On the Soul in some respects among the less important. The emotions are
examined in far greater detail in his Rhetoric. It is in his History of Animals that modes
of adaptation are closely examined. Personality and character formation are central in his
ethics treatises, and so on. Having written at some length on these points (Robinson,
1989), I will not waste space and abuse patience repeating myself here. What one learns
from a sustained investigation of Aristotle’s psychological works is just what a system-
atic psychology might look like if “modern” psychology were up to the task. Again, this
is not the place to rehearse that proposition. It is worth noting in order to make clear that
the past can be highly instructive without being causally efficacious. Instead of repeating
all this, let me point briefly to several themes and tensions in Aristotle’s works that would
engage later and major figures in the history of psychological thought up to and includ-
ing our own era.

What comes to mind first is the question of how best to categorize objects and events
judged as worthy of study. Long before psychology found its language, it had to find
itself. It had to find a subject. To find the subject, however, is to distinguish something
from other things. Aristotle's was a commonsense approach, informed by what he correctly took to be our essentializing mode of cognition. His Categories lists the properties routinely invoked in establishing the kind of thing a "something" is. Some of these properties are accidental and could be otherwise. Some, however, virtually define the kind of thing and, with these absent, the thing would no longer be what it was.

In his naturalistic studies, Aristotle makes distinctions between fixed, stereotypical modes of adaptation and those that are learned and require intelligence. Nature–nurture issues are framed and addressed at the level of naturalistic observation. His moral psychology assumes that core principles of equity are universal; evidence here is abundantly offered in the marketplace of trade. The separate senses are examined, as is the basis on which their diverse reports are integrated into a coherent experience.

A rough guide in identifying essential properties is their distribution. Find that which nearly every member of the species has and which seems to persist even under radically altered conditions and this offers at least presumptive evidence of being an essential feature. Thus, part of what it means to be a human being is to be a social and political animal essentially. That human beings are political animals presupposes possession of cognitive powers otherwise missing in the balance of the animal economy. There is something about human beings that renders them fit for the rule of law.

Aristotle's treatise—that "book" to which Danziger refers—first denominates the power or faculty (δύναμις) not as reason (νοῦς) but as ἐπιστημονικόν. Perhaps the best rendering of this is a power that allows one to frame and comprehend universal propositions. Obviously, it would be idle to suggest that Piaget's interest in the child's comprehension of universals was somehow indebted to a close reading of Aristotle. It would be a great mistake, however, to suggest that psychology in "the modern sense" understands the problem of universalized cognitions in a manner radically different from Aristotle's understanding. Turning once again to "the book," we find Aristotle noting the temptation to say that it is the soul that does X or Y or Z, and declaring that it is far more sensible and appropriate to say that it is the person who does these things, and perhaps does them with a soul. One might be inclined according to contemporary sensibilities to refer to his position as postmodern! What he opposes here is what has been dubbed the mereological fallacy (Bennett & Hacker, 2003). Aristotle knew of it, for it arises from a cognitive bias at once ancient and modern. It arises from us and can be given any date that is coextensive with human forms of explanation and understanding.

The issues and problems that give content and direction to all of the so-called "life sciences" begin as facts of life for a given type of creature. But the creature, even when human and rational, is not equipped to record, preserve, test, refine, and assimilate such facts, even if it is at some level self-consciously aware of them. That mission, if it is to be undertaken at all, becomes disciplinary and, under favoring conditions, comes to be shared across generations and cultures in the form of books and schools. In his Inferno, toward the conclusion of the Fourth Canto, Dante is led by Virgil to a small assembly of the greatest minds. Standing out among them, not even needing to be named, is Il maestro di color che sanno, the master of those who know. It is Aristotle, of course.

Dante's characterization could just as well be attached to scores and hundreds of scholars whose schoolrooms and books would set the agenda for systematic study for centuries to come. One traces psychology's history to these foundations, not in search of
“originals” of which later versions are mere pastiches. Nonetheless, the inquiry is certainly genealogical, for later scholars are likely to claim the same institutional pedigree; the same institutionalized record of theory, practice, findings, and failures. It is with just such purposes that one might revisit those 18th-century figures judged by Danziger to be so instrumental in forging what he calls “modern psychology,” though no one in that century would now be widely cited in the books and journals representative of the current discipline.

Within the large and diverse theater we refer to as the history of ideas, it is at once difficult and hazardous to make comparisons across broad stretches of time. To “speak of ‘psychology’ in the modern sense” is to employ four words subject to quite different constructions. One speaks in different voices: as participant, narrator, reporter, observer, critic, student, judge. How does one speak of the mind and mental life? As Locke did? As Kant did? As Ryle did? As Dennett does?

Then there is psychology itself—and here it is sufficient simply to examine the divisional structure of the American Psychological Association (APA)—a veritable riot of interests, goals, topics, and methods. Nor does the diversity become more manageable by limiting attention to “experimental” psychology, for this requires the begging of yet another question. Science laboratories were academic late-comers. Justus von Liebig may have been the first to establish a university facility for laboratory instruction and research. He was a mere lad of 21 in 1824 when, on the recommendation of Humboldt, he was named Professor at the University of Giessen. Wundt and James did the same for psychology a half-century later, but, as an academic “experimental science,” psychology is not especially young. Generously extending the genre beyond the groves of academe, we find any number of demonstrations, some ancient, that would qualify. Consider one of the tests routinely applied to determine whether a defendant was a witch. Was she able to form tears during the reading of a moving account of the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ? The “tear test” had high face validity and, on the basis of the findings, proved to be reliable enough in courts throughout the European continent and the British Isles. Whatever else might be said about the test and the barbarous rationale that made room for it, it offered empirical evidence drawn from a non-negligible database. Several centuries later even greater confidence was enjoyed by phrenology and by mesmeric modes of therapy.

One might say (with Danziger, 2000) that in all this there is an essential element missing. The “experimental social psychology” identified by Danziger as “modern” is readily recognized by developed statistical modes of analysis. But surely it is not one or another experimental design or mode of statistics that finally distinguishes experimental science from all that is not experimental science. Very little in experimental physics, for example, makes use of the very statistical devices on which contemporary psychologists so totally depend. Indeed, taking psychophysics as perhaps the most developed expression of experimental psychology, we discover that multivariate analysis is nowhere to be found. I was privileged to be taught by one of the leading figures in vision research, Professor Clarence Graham. How well I recall his caveat: “Remember, if you need statistics, you don’t have an effect!” To put the main point plainly, “psychology” has far too many plausible referents to be useful in doing the work Danziger would have it do.
No ancient Greek had a sense of “industrial psychology,” for no ancient Greek had any sense of “industry” shaped by the industrial revolution. But contrast this fact with, on the one hand, contemporary research disclosing the number and nature of logical failures in day-to-day problem-solving and, on the other hand, the syllogistic logic invented by Aristotle. There would have been no point to Aristotle’s logical treatises had ordinary persons not been obviously prone to fallacious forms of inferential reasoning. Continuity in this case is integral to the very project of thoughts about thinking.

Continuity does not imply close similitude. The syllogistic logic of Aristotle was a logic of terms. Only later, with Chrysippus and Stoic philosophy, was the logic of terms expanded to reach propositions. This development was lost for centuries and had to be recovered by Abelard. Here, then, is historical but not conceptual discontinuity. Propositional logic suffered a period of amnesia but not rejection. Early in the 18th century, Leibniz would build symbolic logic on this very foundation. Finally, through a remarkable and imaginative integration of syllogistic and propositional logic, Gottlob Frege would produce (modern) predicate logic. Without belaboring the point, it should be clear that each of these developments was designed to overcome limitations arising from the application of earlier logical models to actual problems. It would be permissible to say that Aristotle’s sense of logic, at least as revealed in his development of syllogistic modes of analysis, was different from Frege’s sense of predicate logic. However, it would not be permissible to contend that the two differed in their understanding of the manner in which the manipulation of symbols might constitute what is paradigmatic of argumentation.

There are two additional words in the passage from Danziger now requiring comment: “modern” and “sense.” Between 1959 and 1962, under the editorship of Sigmund Koch, McGraw-Hill published six volumes on *Psychology: A Study of the Science*. For those who were graduate students at the time, the volumes stood as a kind of Scripture. Scanning those same volumes today, however, one would be surprised to find more than two or three entries bearing in any meaningful way on contemporary research. One would be hard-pressed to find a serious debate on whether the relationship between habit strength and drive is additive or multiplicative, and how it might be affected by reactive inhibition. So much for Clark Hull.

So when does psychology “in the modern sense” begin? Does one know it when one sees it? Is it simply a matter of what happens to be taking place right now? How about tomorrow? Last week? The point should be obvious: “Modern” is neither a temporal nor a historical term of scholarship. It is rather a veiled judgment, sometimes positive and sometimes negative, rather more aesthetic than analytical. One is permitted to say, for example, “I enjoy Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach*, although I generally do not like modern music; you know, Schoenberg, that sort of thing.” Or, “We rented a delightful room on the Left Bank; c’est de salle tres modern!” The qualifying “modern” is not temporal, for its origin and terminus are fuzzy and arguable. It is not historical (as per, e.g., Collingwood) for it fails to establish identifying motives, impulses, and plans. The most that is reasonably permitted by the word is that what is “modern” is at least recent, even if not current, and stands as a departure from what is older, even if still current. Aristotle’s perspective on human nature is as current, as are today’s treatises on, for example, “virtue ethics,” but it would be misleading to refer to him as “modern” in this respect. Thus,
it is meaningful to say that the Wright brothers introduced the world to modern modes of travel; but it is equally meaningful to say that the modern “jet” replaced propeller aircraft. In the first statement, the Wright brothers are modern; in the second, they are in the history books.

The fourth of the four words is sense, as in “‘psychology’ in the modern sense.” This is entirely too final and legislative. For many, psychology in the modern sense is and must be cognitive neuroscience. For others, the proper sense of the discipline would take it to be a cultural artifact expressing the current values and habitual practices of a guild. Choose psychologists from a dozen different divisions of APA. Seat them in a circle, asking each to write briefly her “sense” of modern psychology. The setting and the task illustrate Wittgenstein’s famous “beetle in the box.” Each participant looking into her own box will report that what is there is “modern psychology.” But, as no one can see the content of any box other than her own, no one has any idea of what is in any box except one’s own. All will insist that their boxes contain modern psychology, though one box may have “cognitive neuroscience,” another “depth psychology,” a third “class and gender studies,” and so on. This is all intentionally overdrawn for effect, in order to make a rather subtle point: We find the “sense” of a term by examining the object, event, or activity to which it routinely refers. On this understanding, if there are many psychologies “in the modern sense,” then there is no settled sense of the term. It is neither nonsense nor senseless; it is merely ambiguous.

Another illustration is in order. Consider the important section in the Critique of Pure Reason where Kant (1781/1999) discusses the “Anticipations of Perception” (A169/ B211). The concept of the threshold is quite fully developed. There is little doubt that Kant’s understanding of the sensory threshold is precisely the understanding held some 150 years later by Hecht, Schlaer, and Pirenne (1942) in their brilliant research on the absolute threshold in vision. However, no part of Kant’s understanding was informed by the probabilistic nature of quantum emissions from a heated tungsten filament, or the ability to control the duration of flashes to the nearest millisecond, or the need to dark-adapt participants for 20 or 30 minutes. Nor did he know that a higher threshold would be found if the flash were presented foveally. Still, it would be correct to say that he understood “threshold” in the modern sense of the term, for that understanding is entirely indifferent to these methodological details.

A quarter of a century later, however, John Swets and his colleagues (1964) would apply signal detection theory in such a way as to challenge the very concept of the threshold as traditionally understood. In light of this, one might say that Kant and Selig Hecht shared the same “sense” of threshold, though we now understand that neither of them understood thresholds “in the modern sense,” if the modern sense is what is authorized by signal detection theory. Thus, and with all due respect, we see that talk about the sense of something, ancient or modern or current, is a game nearly anyone can play, but without profit. Put another way, and again with all due respect, any reference to an entire discipline being somehow “understood in the modern sense” permits so many and even contradictory constructions as to be useless and misleading.

Danziger is scarcely alone in this. Writing approvingly of Danziger’s position, Thomas Teo (2005) has argued that “the most significant critique of psychology in terms of understanding the outlook of current psychology was expressed by Immanuel Kant”
(p. 19). (Kant, of course, credited Christian Wolff with just this achievement.) In any case, it is doubtful in the extreme that Kant would accept credit either as a critic or as a supporter of “the outlook of current psychology.” There is scarcely a page of the First Critique that has not been subjected to relentless and conflicting interpretation. My own poor efforts to render this colossus visible to the uninitiated occupy one book (Robinson, 2012) and four years of giving Oxford’s Core Lectures on the Critique of Pure Reason. Predictably, the book has been generously praised and roundly criticized, the customary fate awaiting those who would presume to speak for the Denkmeister. What is clear, however, is that very little in what Teo takes to be the “outlook” of modern psychology is likely to find even a hostile reception in the Critique.

On Teo’s account, periods earlier than the closing years of the 18th century are properly ignored. As he says,

Such a limitation would also be justified based on Danziger’s argument of historical discontinuity, which suggests that psychology as a separate field of study did not exist before the 18th century and thus he considered textbooks on the history of psychology that begin with the Greeks as ignorant. (p. 19)

As one of the ignorant authors of such a book (Robinson, 1976, 1981, 1995), I am much more inclined to take stock than to take umbrage. Taking stock, I find it necessary to distinguish between historical and conceptual continuity; better perhaps is the distinction between continuity and recurrence. An example is a useful point of entry.

Confining attention to what Teo refers to somewhat ambiguously as separate fields of study, none can claim a more complete and continuous record of development than the field of law. From the time of Solon’s reforms of the laws of Draco, through the extraordinary development of law in Rome and its promulgation throughout the Christian West, this field of study displays well-known and fully documented chains of sequential dependencies. Within that framework, how should notions of continuity and discontinuity be understood?

For illustrative purposes one might choose a specific issue on which written law in the West has never been silent, namely insanity. The legal provisions for dealing with the insane are found in the ancient laws of Athens and are even recorded on Rome’s Twelve Tables. What has continuity in this extraordinary history is the understanding that one cannot be held fully responsible for that over which one has absolutely no agentic control, no relevant power or competence. That understanding is as ancient, medieval, and Victorian as it is “modern.” However, it was not until 1800 in the trial of James Hadfield that the true mark of insanity was accepted as delusion (Robinson, 1996). Here, then, there is something of the discontinuity, as there will be again in the trial of Daniel McNaughten and yet again in the trial of John Hinkley. Nonetheless, insanity is a recurring issue in the long and variegated history of law because it reaches the originating rationale of the rule of law itself. The discontinuity is found at the level of evidence, theory, and methodology, not at the foundational level at which one must be regarded as fit for the rule of law.

Children today are tested on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. Such a test may be used to determine whether a child has sufficient mental competence to be reliable
as a witness, for example. Many centuries earlier, under provisions of common law, mental competence was assessed by testing whether a child could make change with shillings. Or, consider the Roman general now in Britain but without maps, and today’s tourist with a failed GPS. Both are lost “in the modern sense” and in every sense!

The foundational issues in psychology, I submit, are recurring issues. It is in the nature of things that they have always posed actual and even hourly problems for beings of a certain kind, but it was not until the philosophical achievements of the ancient Greek world that they were identified as subjects worthy of systematic study. It is a separate and very interesting question as to why those people at that time, in that place, and under those conditions found themselves virtually inventing various disciplines of study. To be sure, experimentation was not common, but neither was it absent. (Eureka!). It was not extended to those psychological issues—the recurring issues—that give psychology a recognizable identity. There are exceptions to this generalization, of course. Torpedo fish were used to shock paralyzed muscles and comparable sources of electricity were used as analgesics for the pain of childbirth. The Hippocrates noted the contralateral effects of gross brain pathologies and any number of tested methods were designed as aids to memory. Nonetheless, the broader picture finds that the discipline was there in ancient Greece before there was any method we are inclined to regard as modern.

Of course, such methods bring a host of difficulties to which ancient sensibilities were not blind. There is ample evidence in the entire body of classical thought of the need for caution when in possession of but a few facts, drawn from limited and artificial observations made under unusual conditions. Given the record of history, it seems highly likely that our own modern methods will be replaced by still more modern methods, these in turn finding their own place on the shelf reserved for once promising but ultimately failed projects.

A final word must be reserved in behalf of that Enlightenment putatively responsible for giving psychology its voice. Surely one of the most emblematic figures of the time was Condorcet, whose Jesuit education had him steeped in the works of Aristotle, the same Aristotle to whom he turned to bolster his confidence in the idea of progress. Condorcet’s unflagging faith relied, in his own words, on the help of philosophers such as Aristotle. As he says in discussing the Fifth Epoch of the progress of the human mind, Aristotle

not only embraced all the sciences, but applied the method observed in philosophy to the arts of eloquence and poetry. He was the first whose daring genius conceived the propriety of extending this method to everything attainable by human intelligence; since, as this intelligence exercised in all cases the same faculties, it ought invariably to be governed by the same laws. The more comprehensive was the plan he formed, the more he felt the necessity of separating the different parts of it, and of fixing with greater precision the limits of each. And from this epoch the majority of philosophers, and even whole sects, are seen confining their attention to some only of those parts. (Condorcet, 1795)

Think also of Helvetius, building on the efforts of Descartes, Boyle, and Swammerdam. Aristotle’s contentions regarding the chambers of the brain as cooling the blood was abandoned. But it was Aristotle who reported the death of animals placed under domes depriving them of air. How about Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), so passionate in his
defense of a biological psychology? The Priestley whose lectures on history find him referring to “such men as Aristotle, Archimedes and Isaac Newton [who] give us high ideas of the dignity of human nature, and the capacity of the human mind” (Priestley, 1923, p. 50). The point? The major figures of the Enlightenment were educated—as in educated. The architecture of the age is a veritable tribute to the classical world. The Jesuit ratio studiorum suffused instruction from the largest universities to the smallest village classrooms. To be unaware—to be ignorant—of the ubiquity of these influences is to equate today’s narrowly trained workers (each toiling in his or her “field”) with those erudite and agile figures whose acknowledged and fully informed debts to the past liberated them from some of its errors and confusions. I close with a passage from a letter from Benjamin Rush to John Adams:

Philadelphia, October 17, 1809

Who were the ancestors and posterity of Homer, Demosthenes, Plato, and Aristotle? Who were the ancestors and posterity of Cicero, Horace, and Virgil? Were any of them philosophers, orators, or poets? Who were the ancestors and posterity of Walsingham, Sully, Malborough, and Wolfe? Were any of them statesmen, generals, or heroes? I do not ask whether they were descended from gentlemen, or whether they left gentle sons behind them. I ask, were their ancestors GREAT in the same elevated walks of life as themselves? (Rush, 1809)

One must know so much to know anything.

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References


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